

Statement of Steven Simon
Committee on International Relations
Subcommittee on Middle East
"Is there a Clash of Civilizations? Islam, Democracy, and U.S.-Middle East Policy"

I would like to thank the members of the committee for the opportunity to speak on this vital topic.

I will concentrate on some of the key questions posed by the Committee: the nature and origin of Islamist extremism; factors contributing to its rise and those that could contribute to its demise; cohesion between groups, messages, and fatwas; and objectives--domestic or foreign; global, regional, or local.

My observations on these issues are personal. They do not reflect the view of the Council on Foreign Relations, which takes no position on these matters. They are also personal in that other analysts will probably have different answers to these questions, which is as it should be. The topic is complicated. And any discussion of Islam must acknowledge that in an important practical sense, there is no such thing. Rather, there is the complex issue of how Muslims interpret and live their faith. The fact that there are 1.4 billion Muslims settled on nearly every continent and which differ on the basis of ethnicity, race, nationality, sect, temperament, profession, class, and gender should suggest that all generalizations about "Islam" are suspect, or ought to be.

I will concentrate on seven of the conditions that I believe are relevant to the Committee's concerns today: first, the deep roots of the revival movement in which the jihad is embedded; second, the connection between contemporary salafism, what one might call hard Islam, and jihadism; third, the changing nature of clerical authority within the Islamic world; fourth, the globalization of Muslim identity; fifth, evolution of anti-Americanism among Muslims; sixth, the linkages between jihadism and persisting patterns of social organization, particularly in the Arab world; and seventh, the continuing debate over killing civilians in defense of Muslim interests. The point I wish to make here is that the jihad is mobilized and sustained by a wide range of interlocking conditions. Even if one or two of these conditions could be ameliorated, the remaining drivers would continue to propel it in our direction.

Other important factors, including the demographic and socio-economic determinants related to this global movement, the role of democratization, or the precise impact of the new media on Muslim opinion, as well as other significant drivers of militancy, I will leave to colleagues to discuss.

I will close by assessing the objectives of this movement and describing some response options available to us as a society and government.

Origins. The jihad can be traced back most clearly to the Arab reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The intellectual leaders of this broad initiative were

dismayed by the parlous state of affairs in the region. The population was largely poor, educational and scientific achievements were few, and colonial administrations dominated government in those areas that an exhausted Ottoman empire no longer held sway. The evident decline of a once great civilization demanded both explanation and a strategy for renewal. Some prominent reformers laid the blame for decline on Muslims' estrangement from the roots of their religion. A combination of centuries of clerical obfuscation on the one hand and infatuation with the West on the other had cut Muslims off from their spiritual roots. The sources of cultural vitality and confidence were lost. They could be regained, however, through direct access to scripture and the inspiration offered by the actions and experiences of Muhammad and his followers at the very dawn of the Islamic era. These were the *salaf al-salih*, the righteous ancestors. Fortified by renewed and strengthened faith, Muslims could take what they needed from the vast Western inventory of scientific and technological advances to improve the material condition of Muslim society and ultimately gain independence from foreign powers.

This brand of *salafism* evolved significantly since it emerged over a century ago in the Middle East. A pivotal figure in this transformation was an Egyptian intellectual and Qur'an commentator named Sayyid Qutb. Qutb, who was executed in Egypt in 1966, was the Solzhenitsyn of that time and place. An impassioned advocate of justice, he came to see the West as fundamentally corrupt and antithetical to Islamic values. He argued that the two worlds were irreconcilable. A reversion to the values of the *salaf*, the righteous ancestors, and reliance on the classic expressions of God's revelation would have to be accompanied by a rejection of the West. The devolution of earlier forms of *salafism* into more inward looking and rejectionist readings did not take place in a vacuum. During this period, the high expectations created by the difficult process of decolonization were unmet, while economic policies based on socialism failed to improve the standard of living, particularly in Egypt. At the same, post colonial Arab governments lost Palestine to the Jews, raising popular doubts about their legitimacy and competence. The *salafism* of Egyptian radicals cross-bred with the fundamentalism and xenophobia of Wahhabism at this time, as the Saudis provided sanctuary for the Muslim Brotherhood opposition then being persecuted by the Nasser regime in Egypt. A special reverence for the medieval scholar Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya was a feature of radical thinking, in part because of his insistence that without truly Islamic governance there could be no Muslim society and in part because of his apparent endorsement of rebellion against Muslim rulers who failed to enforce Islamic law in their domains. This was the reasoning that animated the assassins of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981. (It was Ibn Taymiyya who urged that jihad be included among the canonical "pillars of Islam.")

The Salafist Revival. Contemporary *salafism* forms the milieu in which jihadism thrives. It is not, however, the same thing as jihadism. Most *salafists* are pietistic, focusing on the reform of society through the reform of individual mores and pattern of behavior. Teaching and preaching are their tools. There are political engaged *salafists*, some of which are establishment clerics, while others are "privatized" preachers or social and political commentators committed to *salafi* goals. They will present governments with so-called memoranda of advice that urge reform, or build organizations that can lobby, or win new adherents by providing social, medical and educational services. Jihadists, who

believe that Islam must be defended through armed struggle, are the minority of *salafists*, but they are obviously highly committed. The links between salafism and jihadism lie in salafi sectarian hostility to Christians, Jews and Shi'a and a literalist reading of the Qur'an, which contains a scattering of verses that valorize warfare against unbelievers. Whereas a mainstream cleric might contextualize these passages within the overall Qur'anic narrative and perhaps cast them as ideals appropriate to a very limited set of conditions, salafists, especially those who are self-educated, will read these verses in an unmediated way. The hardest edge to this part of the salafi spectrum is made up of the so-called *takfiris*, who believe it is permissible to kill Muslims whom they view as collaborators. The debate over the appropriateness of takfir is an old one. Some modern scholars in Saudi Arabia have tried to resuscitate the opposing concept of *irja*, which relegates the determination of apostasy to God, who alone is capable of knowing what is in a Muslim's heart. By and large such efforts have been unsuccessful.

Salafism seems to be burgeoning. It is a relatively uncomplicated doctrine and draws clear distinctions between right and wrong and us and them. It promises a secure personal identity and a role in the community. It eschews local, customary variations of Islamic practice, which enhances a sense of interconnectedness among *salafists* living in far-flung places. And it is imbued with the aura of authenticity that comes with notion that salafism is Islam as it was practiced by the first three generations of Muslims in Arabia.

Clerical Authority. The breakdown of clerical authority contributes to the easy elision of salafism and jihadism. Clerical control over scriptural interpretation and by extension over the actions of the community at large began to erode long ago. The process was hastened by colonial rule, which enhanced the status of technocrats over clerics, and then—inadvertently—by unpopular regimes that put the clergy on their payrolls. Co-opting the clergy for the purposes of the state undermined clerical claims to independence, integrity and, of course, authority. As a result, there is now no universally credible and authoritative institutional brake on the current tendency to justify violence in religious terms, particularly against civilians.

A Globalized Identity. Just as the spread of literacy in 18th and 19th century Europe enabled the formation of national identities and the nation state, the spread of modern media has enabled Muslims the world over increasingly to see themselves as parts of the same community of shared interests, goals, concerns, achievements and grievances.

In Pew polling administered in June 2003, large majorities in eight of nine Muslim survey groups “completely agreed” or “somewhat agreed” with the statement: “I feel more solidarity these days with Islamic people living around the world.”¹ This was the case for 80% or more of respondents in Indonesia and Pakistan, while at least 70% of those surveyed in Lebanon, Nigeria, and Jordan agreed with the assessment. In addition, pluralities in Kuwait, Morocco, and the Palestinian Authority testified to a greater sense of solidarity. Increasing penetration of information technology, access to computers and

¹ The Pew Research Center, “Views of a Changing World,” Final Topline Results, 2003, pg 132

satellite television will accelerate these trends by bringing Muslims together in what the sociologist Benedict Anderson called an “imagined community.” Muslim perceptions of growing threats to their religion can be expected to reinforce this process. This explains, in part, the alacrity with which Spanish and British Muslims carried out terrorist attacks to protest the fate of fellow Muslims in Iraq.

Anti-Americanism. Against the background of these developments, anti-Americanism had been rising in the Muslim, particularly Arab world. These sentiments mesh well with a school of religious thought, such as *salafism*, that deems other faiths inferior and by nature subordinate. But highly resonant anti-American motifs are common outside of the salafist framework as well. Many of these originated outside of the Muslim world entirely, especially in Europe, and were introduced to the region by Nazi and Soviet propaganda in mid-20th century and reinforced by views of the U.S. propagated within the non-aligned movement. Bin Laden’s long “Letter to the Americans” is a good example of this grab-bag approach to anti-American rhetoric. The document lashes the U.S. for its capitalist rapacity, neo-colonial pretensions, propensity for violence, self-righteous hypocrisy, cultural depravity, degradation of women, and, incidentally, for having the wrong religion. The substitution of American power in the region for British authority was bound to tar the U.S. with the imperialist brush. President Eisenhower’s rebuke of Britain’s Suez adventure in 1956 staved this off, but ultimately U.S. support for Israel would take its toll. For the most part, we have balanced our commitment to Israel’s security with our objectives in the Arab world fairly effectively. The intervention in Iraq, however, coupled with a perceived indifference to Palestinian suffering has upset this balance and reinforced anti-Americanism. The result has been a more receptive environment for recruitment of jihadists and a more permissive setting for their tacit supporters.

Here, too, the new media, especially satellite television and the Internet reinforce negative images of the U.S. through a flood of compelling, highly graphic images. Some of these images present the Muslims as victims; others as victors. All tend to frame events as segments of an ongoing good versus evil drama.

Parallel Societies. Islamic activism makes use of “dense associational networks of personal relationships that characterize much of the politics, economic activity and culture” in the region. Given the criminalization of political self-expression, intrusive and corrupt bureaucracies, and pervasive surveillance in some Middle Eastern countries, it is scarcely surprising that so much public activity is unlicensed and below the radar of the state. Informal networks allow entrepreneurs to avoid compliance with regulatory and tax burdens, send funds out of the country, borrow money, or enroll a child in school. Meanwhile, the exclusion of opposition groups from politics has led to the formation of informal organizations that in effect supplant a feckless state by setting up their own patronage networks and providing public services. These unofficial – and in some cases semi-clandestine – networks give radical activists a natural space in which to recruit new members, consolidate their growth, and operate undetected by the state.

Rules of War. There is a debate among salafists about who among the enemy may be legitimately targeted. At root, this is an argument about where the line lies between combatant and noncombatant. This is an important argument because the consensus that emerges will either put mass killers in the category of heretic, or, if the consensus goes in the other direction, justify their actions and create a permissive environment for others who wish to join the fight on brutal terms. At this point, the clerical debate is tacking to the right, with prestigious clerics like Yusuf al Qaradawi, who condemned the 9/11 attacks, now maintaining that violence against Americans in Iraq – including civilian contractors – is permissible. At the other end of the spectrum, bin Laden has argued that all Americans in a democracy must necessarily be regarded as supporting the oppression of Muslims, because they voted for the leader who is implementing these oppressive policies. The logic of this argument puts all Americans in the category of combatant. The main source of restraint now seems to be the awareness of some in the jihadist camp that indiscriminate violence, or at least violence that takes Muslim lives, risks the loss of Muslim hearts and minds. Whether this cautionary stance will ever be applied to non-Muslim lives by jihadists remains to be seen, but must be regarded as unlikely.

Jihadist Objectives. The number of jihadists, or would be fighters, is unknowable, but educated guesses, like those of Scotland Yard, put the total in the thousands. That they all share the same definition of victory, or war aims seems improbable. What can be safely said is that the majority, to judge from web sites, religious opinions, statements of leaders, see themselves in a defensive war against a predatory power. Islam as a civilization is under attack and its historic domains are occupied or under the threat of conquest. From this perspective, Muslims are at the brink. The enemy occupies vast tracts of Central Asia and the Caucasus, Palestine, and Iraq while he exercises a more indirect but no less effective hegemony over Egypt and the states on the Arab side of the Gulf. Moreover, the enemy insidiously corrupts Muslims through a cultural penetration and seduces them with a web of lies that saps the will to resist. Something must be done. The program that seems to have emerged is (a) raise the cost to America and its allies of maintaining a presence in Muslim lands; (b) undermine the regional governments whose cooperation makes American domination possible; (c) reform Muslim society to strengthen its powers of resistance. There seems to be little room for conquest in this model. Indeed, jihadists describe themselves as *murabitoun*, “those who mount the ramparts” in defense of Islam’s borders.

It seems depressingly obvious that many who are imbued with this world-view will not be satisfied by merely conciliatory policy changes, to the extent that a broad assessment of U.S. interests justified such policy departures. Nor would unilateral U.S. actions mollify angry and marginalized European Muslims, who decide to lash out at the U.S. for the same reason the U.S. was targeted for having supported regimes that suppressed Islamist oppositions with such gusto. The fact is that the migratory process that brought millions of peasants to the cities of the Middle East and south Asia has carried millions of Muslims to the urban centers of Europe, thus expanding the geographic area of contention. Hence, whether jihadist aims or defensive or offensive seems to be decreasingly relevant. If the underlying grievances are local, but distributed globally, and expressed in the universalistic terms of jihadist rhetoric, boundaries begin to fade.

Policy responses. Pursuing democratization, even assuming it was in our power to bring it about, would almost certainly result in the accession of hostile governments in the region. Whether this would defang jihadism is open to question. In any case, the costs would be high.

The U.S. presence in Iraq will seriously impede American efforts to influence hearts and minds. Perhaps this will change if a pluralistic, functioning government takes shape and the level of violence diminishes, but such developments appear unlikely at this time. In the interim, our occupation will reinforce regional images of the U.S. as both excessively violent and ineffectual. These images are going to spur Muslims to attack us, or tacitly approve of those who do.

We can affect perceptions of the U.S., at least on the margin, in several ways. America's generous response to the 2004 tsunami that killed more than 100,000 people in Indonesia had a sharply positive effect on public opinion there. The key appeared to be the perception that the aid was unconditional. There is a lesson here.

The U.S. can also lower the temperature of anti-Americanism by engaging more energetically in the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. The key here would be to do so with a greater public acknowledgement of Palestinian grievances. Surely this would be possible without creating the appearance that Washington was either supporting a terrorist clique in Gaza, or weakening its historic commitment to Israel. Again, action taken now will not instantly disable the jihad, but, over time, it will erode the credibility of the jihadist claim that the West was implacably opposed to the Muslim world.

Finally, the U.S. should engage more actively through diplomacy in local conflicts that jihadists exploit and which would ultimately put the US in the jihadists' gunsights. A top U.S. intelligence official told me not long ago that when "we get whacked again, the attacker will have an Asian face." Let me assure the subcommittee that he was not predicting an attack or that an attacker would necessarily be Asian. His point, rather, was that the U.S. was likely to be attacked by someone who was radicalized in the course of a local conflict involving Muslim grievances, a conflict that had been hijacked by jihadists and forced to fit their global agenda. The way to stave off this alternative future is to work with countries such as Thailand and help them see their way toward a meaningful accommodation to Muslims in their midst. This would be an inexpensive investment with a potentially large yield.